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Fear of being laughed at with relation to parent attachment in individuals with autism



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ABSTRACT

The model of putative causes and consequences of gelotophobia (i.e., the fear of being laughed at) assumes that the fear of being laughed at develops as a consequence of (1) individuals' having been laughed at over a long period of time and (2) failing interactions with parents. Past studies show that individuals with autism are subjected to being laughed at and that they tend to worry about being laughed at or ridiculed, but empirical studies investigating the interactions of individuals with autism with parents and these connections between these interactions and gelotophobia have been lacking. The purpose of this study was to identify the characteristics of gelotophobia in individuals with autism and to determine how these characteristics are connected to parental attachment. This study was conducted on 101 students of average intelligence with autism and 163 without autism, with homogeneous ages and gender ratios between the groups. The methods of research consisted of the PhoPhiKat-TC questionnaire and the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA). Compared to students without autism, students with autism were found to exhibit a higher level of fear and dislike of being laughed at but showed no difference from students without autism in enjoying laughing at others. In addition, gelotophobia in students with autism was related to attachment to the student's father but not attachment to the mother, thereby implicating a role for paternal interactions in its development. To decrease the tendency that adolescents with autism have towards exhibiting gelotophobia, this study suggests improving child–father interactions through parent education.

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Gelotophobia is the characteristic wherein individuals fear being laughed at (Ruch & Proyer, 2008a) and therefore feel anxious or worried; its putative causes include individuals' being repeatedly ridiculed or laughed at in childhood and adolescence (Ruch, 2004; Titze, 2009; Ruch, Proyer, & Ventis, 2010; Proyer, Monica, Platt, & Ruch, 2012) and failing to develop interpersonal relationships with significant others in infancy (Proyer, Estoppey, & Ruch, 2012; Proyer & Monica, 2013). Individuals with autism have severe difficulties with social interaction and communication (APA, 2013), and studies

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show that these difficulties result in being laughed at by peers and experiencing increased worry about being laughed at. However, one of the putative causes of gelotophobia, child–parent attachment, requires further empirical studies to be verified. This study thus proposes identifying the connection between gelotophobia and attachment to parents in individuals with autism to have a fuller understanding of the causes of gelotophobia.

1. Being laughed at induces fear

Most people do not like being laughed at, and emotions such as anger, shame, and anxiety emerge from these experiences (Platt and Ruch, 2009); however, most of the time, people know how to handle such situations (Chen, Chan, Ruch, & Proyer, 2011). Gelotophobes, however, cannot distinguish the differences between playful teasing and ridicule; they consider all types of laughing hostile and worry that their behaviour was placed under the microscope (Titze, 2009), which leads them to social withdrawal, low self-esteem, and lack of sense of humour.

To quantify the degree to which one fears being laughed at, Ruch and Proyer (2008b) developed a self-report inventory with 15 items, the GELOPH Use angular brackets (15). They consequently extended another two concepts of “laugh”—gelotophilia (i.e., the joy of being laughed at) and katagelasticism (i.e., the joy of laughing at others). Ruch and Proyer (2009) further developed the PhoPhiKat (45) questionnaire to evaluate the tendency of an individual towards gelotophobia; gelotophobia correlates negatively with gelotophilia but positively with katagelasticism. For Chinese-speaking regions, Chen et al. (2011) translated the PhoPhiKat into Traditional Chinese and validated the correlation between gelotophobia and other personality features. The results of an empirical study showed that gelotophobia was positively correlated to positive humour styles (Chen et al., 2011) but negatively correlated to some Big Five traits such as extraversion, agreeableness, emotional stability, and openness to experience (Chen et al., 2011; Ruch & Proyer, 2009; Ruch, Harzer, & Proyer, 2013). According to the results of cross-cultural studies, Chinese individuals tend to fear being laughed at more than Swiss individuals do, and a significant difference in the tendency towards gelotophobia has been found comparing Eastern and Western cultures.

In conclusion, one's tendency towards gelotophobia differs individually. However, why are some people more afraid of being ridiculed than others? The model of the putative causes and consequences of gelotophobia suggests that gelotophobia originates from individuals' being unable to feel loved or appreciated in their interactions with parents during early development and consequently failing to acquire a sense of belongingness; it may also result from traumatic experiences of repeated ridicule or bullying in childhood and adolescence. This model is continuously supported by the results of relevant studies. Ruch (2004) showed that personal experiences and issues with attachment relationships in childhood or adolescence lead to social withdrawal and gelotophobia. By focusing on the parent-child interaction, Proyer et al. (2012) showed that the style of the parent-child relationship could be an index of a child's fear of being laughed at, insofar as children tend to be afraid of being teased when the parenting style is rooted in discipline and control. Weibel and Proyer (2012) noted that children have a diminished tendency towards gelotophobia when they receive more support from parents. Moreover, Platt (2008) first investigated the relationship between bullying experience and gelotophobia, which were found to be positively correlated ($r=0.47$). In a study by Samson, Huber, and Ruch (2011), gelotophobia was found to correlate positively with past social experiences of being laughed at, meaning that, for adults, the level of gelotophobia increases with the frequency and seriousness of such experiences in the past.

2. The causes of worries about mocking and ridicule experienced by individuals with autism

Autism is a neurodevelopmental syndrome resulting in difficulties in behavioural performance, social interaction, and communication; autism also leads to difficulties with learning and routine activities (APA, 2013). According to theory of mind, individuals with autism lack the skills needed to interpret social and emotional information (Baron-Cohen et al., 1999; Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Hill, Raste, & Plumb, 2001; Bowler, 1992; Wu et al., 2014). Having little of the necessary understanding of communication skills, social cues and norms, individuals with autism, although eager to form friendship with others, often act in a strange or awkward manner, sometimes even exhibiting emotional outbursts because of their neurotic disposition and thus become the targets of peer pranks, ridicule, and bullying (Carter, 2009; Myles & Simpson, 2003). These repeated traumatic experiences lead to a higher level of gelotophobia in individuals with autism.

Another cause of gelotophobia in individuals with autism may involve interactions with significant others in early life (Samson et al., 2011), that is, attachment to the primary caretaker (Ainsworth, 1969; Bowlby, 1977). Individuals' attachment to parents, however, does not only exist in childhood but continues through adolescence to adulthood (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1988). This argument is supported by numerous studies that have found that individuals with autism show no differences from people without autism with regard to attachment to parents; this is especially true for those with high-functioning autism (Gernsbacher et al., 2005; Haltigan, Ekas, Seifer, & Messinger, 2010; Rutgers, Bakermans-Kranenburg, van IJzendoorn, & van Berckelaer-Onnes, 2004; Sigman & Ungerer, 1984; Shapiro, Sherman, Calamari, & Koch, 1987), and the results of this series of studies pioneered by Sigman et al. (1987) have been stable and highly replicable. A meta-analytic review of 16 empirical studies was conducted by Rutgers et al. (2004), in which no difference in attachment relationships with significant others was detected between children with autism and children without autism, indicating that individuals with autism have evident difficulties with communication and social interactions but that these difficulties do not influence attachment relationships with significant others. Parental attachment of individuals with autism may therefore be connected to gelotophobia in a manner identical to that of people without autism.

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